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The Armenian Genocide, from the lens of *National Geographic*

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From 1915 to 1923, under the 'Young Turk' government, 1.5 million Armenians out of a total of 2.5 million Armenians within the former Ottoman Empire were killed[i]. The organization of such was done in a systematic manner; following Red Sunday[ii], Armenians were called from their homes and told that they would be relocated; however, they were in fact sent on 'death marches' to concentration camps in the desert where they would starve to death of hunger and thirst. In the midst of these events, science and geography magazine *National Geographic* published 'its records [iii] ' of what would later be (controversially) defined as the Armenian Genocide[iv] in its November 1919 issue. The portrayal pales in its similarity to other archives treating the same subject, drawing upon elements of what may very well perhaps be unique to the magazine's aesthetic. In this essay, the framing of the Armenian Genocide in *National Geographic* will be examined in such a manner so that one may uncover as to whether or not this framing is accurate (even if there is an accurate one, per say), and what influence does the institution (in this case, *National Geographic)* play in collecting these 'records[v].'

Before elaborating on this particular set of photographs, one must first define the term 'archive.' In his 1978 essay published in *Inscriptions*, 'Archives, Documents, Traces,' French philosopher Paul Ricoeur proposes the archive's definition to be comprised of three main characteristics; reference to a notion of a document or record, relationship to an institution, and action of putting documents produced by an institution into an archive by means of deciding between discarding and preservation. It is to say that the archive is an organized body of documents.

To further preface the investigation of this archive, one must also have a firm grasp of *National Geographic* as a magazine and its particular approach towards photojournalism. The publication, formerly known as *National Geographic Magazine*, is the official journal of the National Geographic Society, and since first being published in 1888, the monthly magazine has been translated into over thirty-four languages. History aside, though, the importance of *National Geographic*, here, lies in its portrayal of the foreign and its capturing of a specific moment in time. *New York Times* art critic Andy Grundberg comments on the photographs in his 1988 essay 'Decoding *National Geographic*' with the following words:

> 'represent[ing] the apotheosis of the picturesque… embody[ing] many of the same conventions of colour and form as *plein air* painting. They aim to please the eye, not to rattle it. As a result of their naturalism and apparent effortlessness, they have the capacity to lull us into believing that they are evidence of an impartial uninflected point of view.' (Grundberg 1974, 175)

With that said, one cannot help but reflect on this archive and ask whether the photographs represent the actual truth in its entirety, or whether there is a skewed perception, and thus obscuring some of what is now known about the Genocide.

Despite the magazine's social status as an authority figure with regards to science and history, there are parallels to be drawn between the photographs in this archive and the magazine's particular aesthetic qualities as described by Grundberg. Figure 12 carries this air of artistry, which pleases the eye. With the two men standing, one of whom with a valiant poise, at the edge of the photograph, it seems as though there is nothing hidden in the image, there being no particular nuance or untold story. Even the caption tells a tale that is different from what is often heard about the Genocide. The caption reads 'a bullock train with American flour going to the rescue;' : such makes the Genocide so much less devastating. But why? *National Geographic*'s approach, drawing upon Grundberg, is not to confront the viewer with discomfort, but rather to attract an audience and to 'please the eye,' which this photograph does accomplish with its lack of disturbing material.

Figure 8 similarly accomplishes the same mission but with the use of scenery as opposed to people. The composition of the image doesn't necessarily lend to despair, attributed to by the open space, but rather, it lends an air of mystery with its desolateness and unremarkable persons. To further explicate the comment on shared space within the overall archive, it is to say that if this archive was filled with

photographs of about-to-die photography and post-mortem images, the reading of this particular photograph would be completely different.

In addition to the maintenance of 'aesthetic' quality of *National Geographic*, there also arises the question of what is lost in the stripping of context. Should one refer to Grundberg's original essay in which a portrait of Zulu couple is shown, for instance: the couple, while wearing traditional garb, is re-appropriated in stance to fit the Western criteria (i.e. stern posture and shaking of one another's hands). In addition, the background holds little meaning as the portrait merely shows shrubbery and little else. If the camera were to pan out, however, would there be something to change the minds over this appearance of 'barbarism meets civilized photographer and customs?' One is not sure of what exists outside the frame other than the very possibility that the beyond may offer very different stories. Similarly, such thinking can be applied to this particular archive. Figures 1 and 2 fall in direct line with this notion of extrication from context. Both photographs offer close-ups of the subjects in rather stoic positions, with backdrops detailing very little. It becomes apparent in turn that these photographs are meaningless without the supplied captions or categorization and placement into an archive, thus providing more information through its neighbouring images or overarching title.

Similarly, Figures 4 and 7 carry little meaning without some type of ascription, whether it is a particular marker or a caption so as to provide value to the scene on hand. Upon reading the captions, one notes that Figure 4 seeks to portray the Armenians begging for bread and that Figure 7 depicts the direness of the situation –

the child is so hungry that he has eaten candle-grease. But why must one read the caption in order to understand the scene – would it not have made more sense to have the photographs explicitly illustrate the activities before or after this snapshot? In short, the argument could be made that those before and after shots simply do not follow the *National Geographic* aesthetic; it would be too 'vulgar.' It is not as though the magazine is adverse to telling the truth, but rather, the magazine chooses to tell a softer truth, one that is implicit and requires much more context than what the average viewer would have. It is not a censorship, but rather, an incomplete utterance.

On this notion of what is absent from this archive, one also comes across with the lack of 'disturbance' in this particular archive, for one often associates the concept of 'genocide[vi]' with gore and terror. However, very little of such can be found in these photographs. In fact, there is no evidence of there being any bloodshed at all, which may very well communicate a different history of the Armenian Genocide to someone hearing about it for the first time. The physical disturbances are severely lacking, but perhaps it is because of that, which permits one to observe an overarching *punctum*[vii] – the sensitivity to time.

This particular prick in our viewing of the photograph ties itself closely with the postmemory[viii]. It is to say that while the people photographed are not known on a personal level, their fate, nevertheless, based on historical accounts can be inferred. In other words, those posing for a group photograph, such as Figures 5 and 6, may very well sustain the belief they will not die, but rather, will simply be relocated. However, the postmemory dictates otherwise; the rescue and collecting of orphans means very

little as it is known now that they will most likely die or endure harsh conditions before being able to see freedom again. What makes the two aforementioned photographs to potentially be the most 'disturbing,' however, is both the innocence associated with children and the large group photo with the personable gazes poignantly directed at the audience. While Figure 11 also illustrates death in masses, the impact is softened by the fact that there is no direct gaze to challenge the knowledge of their fates and their beliefs. In effect, the *punctum* overshadows the archive as the particular innocence or lack of gore that *National Geographic* attempts to show, and reveals something much darker – death does not linger, as it would with post-mortal photographs, but rather, it permeates, weaving itself between the unspoken gazes and stances.

Thus, not only does one begin to concede the limitations of this particular archive as a reflection of the Armenian Genocide, but also question the archive itself. Art historian and writer Charles Merewether posits that the archive, in all regards, will always be incomplete. That is to say that there will never be an archive that will illuminate every shadow of a particular event or subject; the reason being that there will always be documents that will have been lost, misplaced, or not yet seen. And even if it were to be believed that all has been done, one is reminded that there are (hidden) personal albums that may very well constitute as a potential addition to any archive, Furthermore, one has to remember that an archive makes clear decisions of what to include and what to exclude; in which case, something will always be left behind.

It is with that in which one comes across the notion of absent images and image icons. Postmemory dictates the brutality inflicted as one of the most jarring aspects of the Armenian Genocide captured on film; it is depicted through other photographs taken at that time with subjects emaciated, stranded, or already dead. However, none of which is present in this particular set of photographs. Therefore, in viewing this particular set of photographs, how exactly does *National Geographic* want its audience to remember the Armenian Genocide, and what does the postmemory do to argue against this goal?

The Armenian Genocide is not a series of events that have often been touched upon in high school textbooks, let alone assessed in-depth. Similar to the Japanese internment camps that scholar and professor Marita Sturken discusses in her journal article, titled *Absent Images of Memory: Remembering and Reenacting the Japanese Internment*, the lack of image-iconography and its continued existence in postmemory poses a problem in modern society. The photographs that are available, especially in this archive, speak quite differently than what exists in the postmemory, which is curated by lives; lived and experienced. For instance, Figures 9 and 10 echo a history that is misconstrued, much like what has been seen in the archives of Japanese interment camps. The women and children in both of these Figures are poised in such a manner that it almost seems as though they are not suffering a great deal. Perhaps one can liken Figure 10 to the image of Japanese women in the internment camps in the US working laboriously. However, the photographs do not tell of the horrendous conditions or long hours. Instead, both this photograph and the

Japanese interment photograph communicate an air of some comfort. Even if these photographs communicate differently from what seems to be true in the postmemory, what effect is there?

Such a question is difficult to answer, though it may lead one to discuss the notion of an absent memory. Given that society relies on photography so as to remember events and history, there seems, posed, a problem in which if the 'wrong' or 'inaccurate' is uttered, people may very well take it to be truth, should they not share in the postmemory. Therefore, it seems that there is a conflict arisen between those that are in the knowing of the events of the Armenian Genocide and those that are in the wanting to know or to see. And given that there is no image-icon, there is no real association or identity for the Armenian Genocide in modern society without deep explanation of context. It is simply not ingrained in popular history or culture today, and is somewhat lost in the midst of all of this.

With all that said, it is clear that *National Geographic*'s aesthetic and aim to please the eye clouds its presentation of the Armenian Genocide. The lack of confrontation with the viewer leads the audience to create an understanding that differs from those that have experienced the events and who have subsequently passed down their knowledge of what has happened to further generations, creating a postmemory. The photographs, to those with the postmemory of the Genocide, prove to be an understatement of the events in its articulation of 'what has been.'

It seems as though these photographs are in their own place of nonexistence, neither falling in line what is now considered as 'truth' – the horror and macabre of

the Genocide – or what one could call memorialization as there is no physical commemorating of these photos, apart from publication in a magazine that they will never see. The exclusion of the more jarring photographs by *National Geographic* may, while providing some aesthetically pleasing information to the audience, very well have further complicated the understanding of what took place between 1915 and 1923 in its creation of a social countermemory[ix] in North America.

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‘Begging for Bread as the American Relief Train Arrives at an Armenian Station.’ *National Geographic*, 1919.

‘Armenian Orphans at Alexandropol: They Receive One-Half Pound of Bread and a Lump of Sugar Per Day.’ *National Geographic*, 1919.

‘Orphan Refugees, Who Are Hoping to Reach Some Town Where There Is Bread. These Were Children Who Ate the Candle-Grease Drippings Alongside the Relief Committee Car, in a Land Which Is Naturally Fertile.’ *National Geographic*, 1919.

‘Refugee Burial Ground Outside Etchmiadzin.’ *National Geographic*, 1919.

‘At Igdir, Armenian Children Eating Their Dole of Boiled Rice Supplied by the American Committee.’ *National Geographic*, 1919.

‘Armenian Children Weaving Rugs in the American Committee Shops at Erivan.’ *National Geographic*, 1919.

‘Seeking What Warmth the Sun Can Give, Alexandropol.’ *National Geographic*, 1919.

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Appendix

Figure 1. 'His Parents Have Been Slain; He Starves.' *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

Figure 2. 'This Brother and Sister, Orphans, Were Begging for a Train-Ride to Some Other Town, Where There Might Be Bread.' *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

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Figure 3. 'Starving Women in the Town of Igdir.' *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

Figure 4. 'Begging for Bread as the American Relief Train Arrives at an Armenian

Station.' *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

Figure 5. Chater, Melville. 'A Single Day's Rescue at Erivan.' *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

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Figure 6. 'Armenian Orphans at Alexandropol: They Receive One-Half Pound of Bread and a Lump of Sugar Per Day. *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

Figure 7. 'Orphan Refugees, Who Are Hoping to Reach Some Town Where There Is Bread. These Were Children Who Ate the Candle-Grease Drippings Alongside the Relief Committee Car, in a Land Which Is Naturally Fertile.' *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

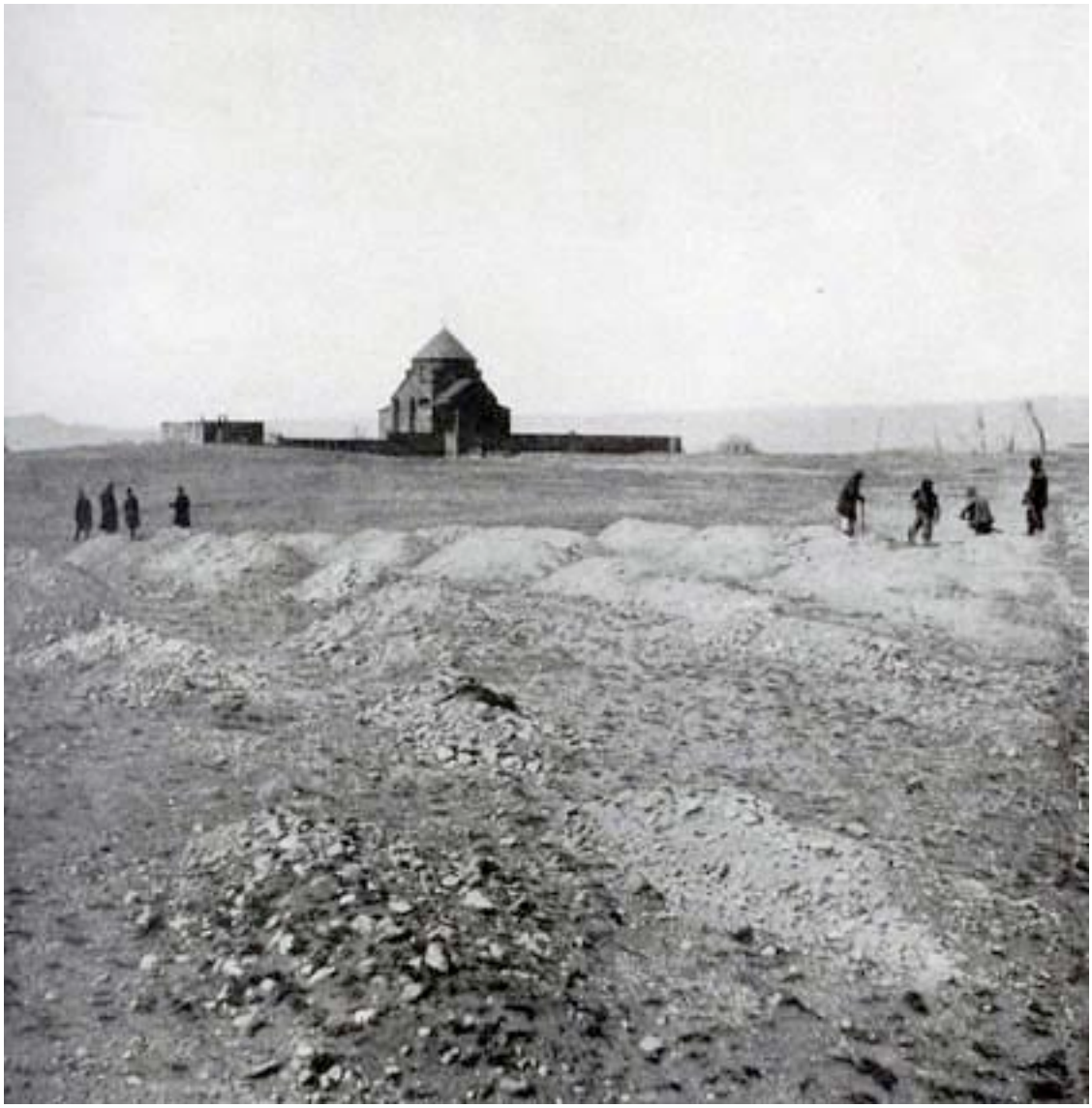

Figure 8. 'Refugee Burial Ground Outside Etchmiadzin.' *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

Figure 9. ‘ At Igdir, Armenian children eating their dole of boiled rice supplied by the American Committee.’ *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

Figure 10. ' Armenian children weaving rugs in the American Committee shops at Erivan.' *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

Figure 11. ' Seeking what warmth the sun can give, Alexandropol.' *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

Figure 12. ‘ A bullock train laden with American flour going to the rescue.’ *National Geographic*, 1919, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/national_geographic_magazine.php (accessed November 15, 2011)

Notes

[i] "Fact Sheet: Armenian Genocide," *Ed. Center, Knights of Vartan Armenian Research at The University of Michigan-Dearborn*, November 15 2011, http://www.umd.umich.edu/dept/armenian/facts/genocide.html.

[ii] The night (April 24, 1915) in which intellectual leaders of Armenian society in Constantinople were rounded up and arrested. They were later deported with the passage of Tehcir Law on May 29th, 1915.

[iii] The quotation marks make reference to the denotation of ownership over a particular set of records

[iv] Much of the controversy stems from Turkey's denial of there being genocide. Instead, officials state that it was merely a removal of Armenians from the eastern "war zone," although evidence dictates otherwise. Despite Turkey's refusal to acknowledge the genocide, 21 countries (as of 2009), such as Canada, Argentina, and Sweden, recognize the Armenian Genocide. Hadjilyra, Alexander-Michael, *The Armenians of Cyprus*, Kalaydjian Foundation.

[v] The terminology "record" refers to the collected document that may very well take part in composing an archive. Ricoeur, Paul. "Archives, Documents, Traces." *Inscriptions*, 1978.

[vi] The term here is applied anachronistically; Polish-Jewish scholar Raphael Lemkin only coined the word –genocide – in 1944.

[vii] Such term is derived from French theorist Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*; the *punctum* is what one finds to be disturbing in a particular photograph – what pricks a person. It should be noted that it is subjective. In the text, Barthes pairs the term with the broader *stadium*, which is a shared cultural space or knowledge.

[viii] Postmemory in its simplicity refers to the work of memory that has been acquired "through the inherited remembrance of subsequent generations." (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 15)

[ix] Barthes notes the countermemory in *Camera* Lucida as a memory constructed from a particular event, but is in fact wrong when confronted with a photograph that reveals a different story.